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ABSTRACT

It is maintained in this paper that the "crisis" in writing is more a function of instructors' attitudes and expectations than a result of how students actually write. There are various reasons to question the crisis, for example: while the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)--the most careful test of writing ability for grades 4, 8, and 12--are disappointing, the NAEP is not a "normed" test and indeed there are no national norms or standards for determining how well students write. In addition, writing is extremely complex; teacher approach it with different criteria in mind and therefore often disagree about what constitutes good writing. The paper maintains that the most obvious reason students do not write well is that they do not receive much instruction in writing and they rarely write. After offering examples of how "workaday" writing (such as notetaking, journals, freewritings, and microthemes) could be used in classrooms, the paper discusses two ways of teaching the process of formal writing (the natural process and structured learning), describes the characteristics of each, and recommends some combination of the two methods. Finally, the paper outlines five steps for incorporating formal writing into college courses, discussing specifically how such a teaching strategy would work for a course in American history and giving an extensive list of possible writing forms, as well as some hypothetical assignments. Fifteen references are included. (PRA)

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Improving Student Writing

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"Language is acquired only by absorption and contact with an environment in which language is in perpetual use."
Samuel Thurber (1898, paraphrased in Judy & Judy, 1981, p. 18)

The "Crisis" in Writing

Of course, we want our students to write well. And we know from our own classes, as well as from newspaper articles and television specials, that our students do not write as well as we think they should. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—the most careful test of writing abilities in grades 4, 8, and 12—reports that "across the entire set of writing tasks administered, performance varied considerably. At grade 4, the percentage of adequate or better responses ranged from 9 to 47 percent across tasks; at grade 8, the range was from 14 to 51 percent; and at grade 12, it was from 24 to 56 percent" (Applebee, Langer, Jenkins, Mullis, & Foertsch, 1990, p. 8). These results seem to confirm our worst fears.

Reasons To Question the "Crisis"

However, there are many reasons for thinking that the "crisis" in writing is more a function of our attitudes and expectations than it is a result of how our students actually write.

For one thing, we need to remember that **the NAEP is *not* a normed test**. Indeed, there are no national norms—or standards—to help us determine what students at various ages should be able to accomplish, with or without schooling. As a result, we have little basis other than our own expectations for deciding how well our students write.

In addition, **writing is extremely complex**, so we have no common standard for what we mean when we say that our students do not write well. Depending on circumstances, we may mean 1) that the writing of our students is not well thought out, 2) that it is not clearly organized, 3) that it is not well documented or that it needs more detail or evidence, 4) that it needs to be better edited, 5) that it needs a more appropriate tone, 6) that it needs to be better adapted to the circumstances in which it was written, or simply 7) that it needs to be "clearer," whatever that may mean.

As a result, **we often disagree about what constitutes good writing**. In a major study of 300 essays read by 53 readers in six different fields—English, social science, and natural science teachers; editors, lawyers, and business executives—Paul Diederich (1974, p. 6) found that 101 essays "received every grade from 1 to 9 [the entire range possible]; 94 percent received either seven, eight or nine different grades."

A final reason for thinking the crisis in writing is a function of our attitudes is that **the crisis has remained remarkably stable for one hundred years**. Indeed, the crisis began with the rise of mass education at the end of the nineteenth century. For example, in 1898 the subject A examination at the University of California, a precursor of today's writing tests, indicated that 30 to 40 percent of those taking the test were not proficient in English, a number remarkably similar to the number of those who do not do well on today's tests. Yet "in 1890 3.5 percent of all seventeen-year-olds graduated from high school; by 1970 the number was 75.6 percent" (Rose, 1989, p. 6). It seems that the percentage of students "deficient" in English has remained the same while we have been educating a much higher percentage of the population at the high school level!

The Most Obvious Reason Why Our Students Do Not Write Well Enough

The reason for our students' inability to write well enough to meet our expectations are many and varied. Many of us blame television, or the lack of homework in school, or the breakup of the nuclear family. However, the most obvious reason that our students do not write well is that **they do *not* receive a great deal of instruction in writing** and **they do *not* write very much**. A decade ago, Arthur Applebee (1981) reported that students spent less than three percent of class time and less than three percent of homework engaged in writing anything longer than a paragraph. More recently the NAEP reported that students in grade 8 spend about an hour a week learning how to write (Applebee, *et al.*, 1990) and that they are encouraged to define their

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purpose and audience and to revise only about half the time. Overwhelmingly, when students do write, they tend to write only reports, summaries, or analyses. In English classes, they write a few stories or poems. They do *no* persuasive writing to speak of (Applebee, 1981).

As far as I know, there are no studies of the amount of writing students do in college, although in one survey conducted in 1987, 427 colleges and universities out of 2,735 institutions polled had some form of writing-across-the-curriculum which required at least one upper-level writing course after the freshman year (McLeod & Shirley, 1988). My general impression from talking to colleagues in the profession from around the country is that in most colleges and universities students write very little: perhaps an occasional paper for mid- and upper-level classes in the humanities. With the possible exception of those 427 colleges and universities with writing-across-the-curriculum programs, college students probably receive *no* instruction in how to write these papers. They are simply told to produce a paper of a certain kind by a certain date and are graded on how well they meet the instructor's expectations.

If we are going to improve the writing of our students, it seems that we are going to have to teach writing more often and more effectively and we are going to have to require our students to write more often so that they can get the practice they need.

Writing to Learn

For students to get the instruction and practice in writing that they need, *all* college teachers—*not* just those who teach English—need to promote writing. Of course, we all have the primary responsibility of teaching our own disciplines, but there is compelling evidence that students who use writing in their everyday school activities learn the material more effectively than those who do not (Langer & Applebee, 1987). And there are many ways to promote writing other than by requiring students to write formal papers. After all, we use writing in many ways. "Workaday" writing is what Stephen Tchudi calls writing which students can use to help them to learn. According to Tchudi (1986, p. 20) **"workaday" writing** has the following three characteristics:

1. "It is generally **short and impromptu**, not requiring large amounts of student or class time.
2. It is **written primarily for the benefit of the writer** as an aid to clarifying experience; thus,
3. It **does *not* require extensive instructor commentary** and response (theme correcting)."

Workaday writing includes the following forms:

Notetaking, which requires students to not only take careful notes but to reflect critically and analytically on what they have heard or read. For example, students might be asked to respond to lectures or reading by answering these kinds of questions:

- What did you already know about his material?
- What is new to you?
- Does anything contradict what you already knew?
- Does anything expand or provide more evidence for what you already knew?
- What don't you understand?
- What support does the speaker or writer give for his or her facts?
- What patterns of reasoning does the speaker or writer offer as evidence?
- Have you encountered reasoning like this before? If so, where? Are these patterns typical of the discipline as a whole?

Journals, which require students to write extensively several times a week, summarizing what they have learned, raising issues and problems. Teachers may use the same sort of guide questions for journals as they use for notetaking.

Freewritings. Stephen Marcus asks his students to "write free associations to whatever comes into their minds in response to a reading, lecture, or discussion" (quoted in Tchudi, 1986, p. 24). Marcus uses the following kind of assignments:

- Write down three words that were important in today's assignment and explain their importance.
- Do a three-minute to five-minute free write on the topic of today's class as a warmup for discussion.
- Respond to a "seed sentence." (Here the instructor chalks a key concept or provocative sentence on the board.)
- Prepare for laboratory by writing down what is to be done in lab, any confusion as to procedures, and what this experiment is expected to create or prove.
- Do a "postwrite," summing up or reacting to a lecture, discussion, chapter, or laboratory experience.

Microthemes—"mini-essays"—on 5- X 8-inch cards, which require students to write summaries, support theses, pose questions, work with data, and provide support for generalizations (Tchudi, 1986, pp. 24-25). Here is a sample microtheme assignment for an introductory physics class (Bean, Drenk, & Lee, 1982, p. 35):

Suppose that you are Dr. Science, the question-and-answer person for a magazine called *Practical Science*. Readers to your magazine are invited to submit letters to Dr. Science, who answers them in "Dear Abbey" style in a special section of the magazine. One day you receive the following letter:

Dear Dr. Science,

You've got to help me settle this argument I am having with my girlfriend. We were watching a baseball game several weeks ago when this guy hit a pop-up straight over the catcher's head. When it finally came down, the catcher caught it standing on home plate. Well, my girlfriend told me that when the ball stopped in midair just before it started back down, its velocity was zero, but acceleration was not zero. I said she was stupid.

If something isn't moving at all, how could it have any acceleration? Ever since then she has been making a big deal out of this and won't let me kiss her. I love her, but I don't think we can get back together until we settle this argument. We checked some physics books, but they weren't very clear. We agreed that I would write to you and let you settle the argument. But, Dr. Science, don't just tell us the answer. You've got to explain it so we both understand, because my girl friend is really dogmatic. She said she wouldn't even trust Einstein unless he could explain himself clearly.

Sincerely

Baseball Blues

Can This Relationship Be Saved? Your task is to write an answer to Baseball Blues. Because space in your magazine is limited, restrict your answer to what can be put on a single 5 X 8 card. Don't confuse Baseball and his girlfriend by using any special physics terms unless you explain clearly what they mean. If you think some diagrams would help, include them on a separate sheet.

All of these activities give students the opportunity to write in order to clarify for themselves what they are learning and why. They also give us as teachers a chance to quickly determine how well the students can use the terms and concepts being taught in our courses. Because these writings are short and informal, they do not need to be graded, and we can read many of them in relatively little time. They also provide us with the opportunity to conduct a dialogue with students on an individual basis.

Students may also do workaday writing for each other, either for small study groups or for the class as a whole. Such writing would include reports; abstracts, summaries, and precis; letters, interviews, class newsletters, annotated bibliographies, and evaluations, to name a few (Tchudi, 1986).

Teaching Formal Writing

The two most common ways of teaching the process of formal writing are Natural Process and Structured Learning. According to George Hillocks (1986, p. 119), the **Natural Process** method has the following characteristics:

1. "**Generalized objectives,** such as to increase fluency and skill in writing."
2. **Free writing in journals or class notebooks**, in which students reflect on their own experience or on their reading in order to formulate ideas to shape into more formal writing.
3. An **audience of peers** to respond to the writer's ideas and drafts, and to provide systematic feedback.
4. Generally *positive* **feedback from peers**. Positive feedback has been shown to improve attitudes toward writing and writing classes; it is a necessary precursor to accomplished writing.
5. **Opportunities to revise**. Only by responding to comments on early drafts and putting them into practice can students demonstrate what they have learned and internalized from the advice they have received.
6. High levels of **interaction among students**, which has also been shown to improve the morale of students and their commitment to writing.

The Natural Process method is "natural" in the sense that it is modeled after the way most of us write: most of us jot down notes and memos to get ideas and shape our drafts; most of us consult colleagues and friends about ideas, sources, and ways of saying things; most of us take a good deal of time to write, going through a series of drafts, refining and polishing, consulting with others along the way.

Structured Learning *differs* from Natural Process in that it requires students to practice particular skills before they use these skills in writing. What Hillocks calls the "environmental mode" of instruction and a "focus on inquiry" are examples of structured learning. The **characteristics of the environmental modes** (Hillocks, 1986, p. 122) are these:

1. **Clear and specific objectives**. For a laboratory in chemistry, a specific objective might be the accurate reporting of data in a certain format.
2. Materials and problems to engage students with each other in **specifiable processes** important to writing. To give students practice in reporting data, they might be given sets of raw data and asked to interpret the data and write up the results in a specified format.
3. Activities with a great deal of **peer interaction**, in order to give students practice in working on "concrete materials and problems, the working through of which not only illustrates the principle but engages students in its use."

Inquiry techniques ask students to analyze a set of data collaboratively to "help [them] develop skills or strategies for dealing with the data in order to say or write something about it" (Hillocks, 1986, p. 211). Thus, environmental and inquiry pedagogies are more highly structured and more focused on controlled practice than natural process methods. In a massive study of the effectiveness of various strategies for teaching writing, Hillocks found that the environmental mode and a focus on inquiry were by far the most beneficial pedagogies for improving writing.

However, the environmental mode and a focus on inquiry do *not* seem to be well designed to teach those intangibles we look for in effective prose, such as an appropriate tone, eloquence, or rhetorical sophistication. Only practice over time can give a writer a good sense of what rhetorical strategy would be most effective in a specific situation. Thus, **effective instruction in writing probably involves some combination of natural process and structured learning.**

When planning to incorporate more formal writing into our courses, we might consider the following steps (Tchudi, 1986, pp. 30-37):

1. **Set the content objectives** for learning.
2. **List the real-world writing forms** in which such objectives can be demonstrated. Such real-world forms give students a potential audience, real or imagined, and a role to play so that they can think about matters of style and evidence in a particular context. Since context is usually the determining factor in how we ought to write, all of our assignments should specify a purpose, an audience, and a format for students to follow in fulfilling the assignment.
3. **Create one or more focused activities** that require your students to demonstrate your objectives. Put the requirements for the activity on an evaluation form or checklist so that students can see what they must accomplish.
4. **Help the students through the stages of the writing process**, as necessary. This might involve something as simple as checking an early prospectus to make sure that students are on the right track. It might mean devoting a class period to small-group workshops in which students read and respond to each other's writing. It might involve individual conferences with each student to go over an early draft.
5. **Grade, evaluate, or respond** to the writing. There is a great deal of evidence that teacher comments in and of themselves have *no* effect on student writing *except* when they are focused on how well the students have accomplished the main point of the assignment and provide further feedback on matters which have already been taught and reinforced in earlier activities and workshops (Hillocks, 1986). Therefore, we should avoid making lists of errors and **concentrate instead on commenting on those two or three things which would *most* improve the paper** or which most influenced our grade or evaluation.

Here is how such a teaching strategy would work for a course in American history. First of all, the instructor might set as the content objective: the students will be able to list the possible causes of the Revolutionary War and discuss in detail the arguments for and against various causes.

The real-world forms in which this objective could be made concrete might be a journal of popular history, a feature story in the Sunday supplement of a newspaper celebrating the anniversary of the revolution, or an editorial in a newspaper celebrating a facet of contemporary life which has resulted from the way the revolution changed the country. Tchudi (1986, p. 32) lists the following as possible forms for students to use in writing in their disciplines:

Edited journals and diaries
Press releases
Biographical sketches
Case studies
Letters:
  public/informational
  memoranda
  persuasive
    to editor
    to elected officials
Poster/slide/film displays
Critical Reviews:
  books (including texts)
  films
  outside reading
  television programs
  documentaries
Proposals
Progress reports
Utopian visions
Position papers
Scripts:
  radio
  television
  dialogues
  documentaries
Editorials
Feature articles
Question-answer columns
Political columns
Critical reviews
Story problems
Applications
Math puzzles and conundrums
Discursive footnotes
Record books
Annotations
Interviews:
  actual
  imaginary
Scholarly notes
Specifications
Briefs
Directions:
  how-to
  guides
  hobbies
  academics
Charts
Diagrams
Flowcharts
Tables
User's manuals
Dictionaries and lexicons
Maintenance manuals
Technical reports
Software
Consumer reports
Software documentation
Informational monographs
Financial reports
Cartoons
Minutes
Slide show scripts
Journal articles
Imaginative writing:
  poems
  plays
  stories:
    historical
    science fiction
    fantasy
    informational

Popular articles
Environmental impact
Statements
Telegrams
Commentaries
Newspaper "fillers"
Fact sheets

Here are a few possible assignments for our hypothetical American history professor:

—Choose one possible cause, or series of causes, for the Revolutionary War. For a magazine devoted to making history available to general readers, such as *American Heritage*, explain and provide the evidence in support of one major cause of the American revolution. Clearly document the sources of your evidence, using a form of documentation appropriate to the magazine. Be sure to meet any objections to your evidence. Here is the evaluation form that we will use when we read your paper:

Name: _____ *Reader:* _____

At the beginning of your paper the claim about a possible cause for the Revolutionary War is clearly stated or implied. ___ *Yes* ___ *No*

Your evidence for your claim is clear and convincing. ___ *Yes* ___ *No*
Why or why not?

You cite possible objections to your claim and refute them. ___ *Yes* ___ *No*

You use an appropriate and consistent form of documentation. ___ *Yes* ___ *No*

Comments:

—For a class in American history in high school, outline a lesson plan explaining the causes of the Revolutionary War. Include notes on materials and methods to make the lesson interesting, even dramatic, for college freshmen.

—Imagine that you are a close relative of a soldier thinking of going off to fight on the American or British side in the Revolutionary War. Write a letter to the soldier, arguing why he should or should not go off to battle. Be sure your reasons have to do with national political issues, not just personal ones.

In order to prepare students to do these assignments, the American History **instructor should also give students practice** in how to accomplish the major objective of the assignments. In this case the instructor might give the class a list of facts and figures about the ownership of property among the delegates at the Constitutional Conventions, divide the class into groups of three or four and ask each group to prepare a brief position paper, arguing for or against the claim that the Revolutionary War was fought in order to protect the property of the landed gentry. The point of such activities is to involve students in thinking about the objectives of the course and to give them practice in the kinds of evidence and reasoning they will need to use in their own papers.

In order to help students through the writing process, the American history instructor could ask them to bring an early draft of the paper to class, divide the class into groups of three or four, and have each group read and comment on each other's papers using an evaluation form or checklist based on the specific goals of the assignment. Such peer review not only gives students a number of varied responses to their writing, it also gives them the opportunity to critically analyze the writing of others and to practice the kinds of analysis they will need to use with their own papers.

Finally, the American history instructor needs to respond to the writing she has assigned. In addition to focusing her comments, she should use **Facilitative Commentary** rather than Directive Commentary, which means, according to Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon (1984), 1) she should allow the writer to control the discourse; 2) she should use negotiation and dialogue on the assumption that the writer knows her own purposes better than any reader, but 3) a reader knows the effect the writing had on him better than the writer. This negotiation should emphasize content and promote revision and a richer meaning of the text:

In directive commentary, the teacher says or implies, "'Don't do it your way; do it this way.' In facilitative commentary, the teacher says or implies, 'Here's what your choices have caused me to think you're saying—if my response differs from your intent, how can you help me to see what you mean?'" (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984, p. 129)

Instead of writing in the margin, "You have no evidence for this assertion. Cut it out," the instructor should ask, "On what basis are you making this assertion?" The point is to give students practice in the kinds of thinking which writing requires. If our comments are directive, all our students will get is practice in following directions.

The Bottom Line

We have known for some time why our students do not write well. And we have known for some time how to correct the problem: **more practice over time, more focused practice, more focused feedback**. But for us to use those techniques which have been shown to improve writing, **we need smaller classes** and **an emphasis in the curriculum on writing**. Thus, the solution to the "crisis" in writing is *not only* educational. It is also **social and political**. We must insist in our departments—and in our colleges and universities as a whole—that writing is important enough to be taught throughout the curriculum. And we must constantly remind the public media, funding agencies, college governing boards, and university boards of trustees that we need smaller classes so that we can, first, **require**

our students to write more often and so that we can, second, **give their writing the attention it deserves**. With appropriate financial support, we can indeed begin to deal with the crisis in writing.

With smaller classes and a commitment to writing, we can concentrate on those elements of instruction which have been demonstrated to improve the writing of our students:

1. **Assignments which provide sufficient context for the writing task**: a purpose, an audience, and the conventions involved in writing in the particular context.
2. **An emphasis on the process of writing**: providing instruction and sufficient time for getting ideas, planning, drafting, analyzing drafts, and editing.
3. **Practice in the skills needed to fulfill the major purpose of the writing task.**
4. **Consultation with the instructor or with peers** to critically analyze early drafts.
5. **A focused response** to the final draft which includes how well the writing meets the demands of the particular context and one or two ways to improve others matters, such as organization or editing.

References and Suggested Readings

The references below, preceded by an asterisk, are suggested readings for those interested in a general introduction to teaching writing.

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